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Book Review: Down and Out on the Family Farm: Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains, 1929-1945

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Down and Out on the Family Farm: Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains, 1929-1945. By Michael Johnston Grant. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. xi + 233 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 paper.

Anyone who loves the Great Plains and the life that took root there in the nineteenth century has had to face in recent years the decline and disappearance of that rural world. The Great Depression and the drought years of the 1930s were a key turning point in the evolution of farming on the Plains and helped set the stage for the long-term restructuring of farm life that has gone on there ever since. In *Down and Out on the Family Farm: Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains, 1929-1945*, Michael Grant provides a clear and concise economic history of the region. He believes that the trend toward efficient, larger scale, mechanized farming was largely inevitable, given the commercial orientation of most Plains farmers, and does not condemn those

farmers who bought out floundering neighbors. The farmers who expanded—and the organizations, such as the Farm Bureau, that supported them—merely applied their business ideology to the circumstances. “If there is a culprit in the story,” Grant writes, “it is the proclivity of Americans like the plains farmers to favor opportunity over their own security.” His work focuses on the so-called “borderline” farmers, families making \$500-\$1000 per year and struggling to move up and enjoy a better standard of living. These were the farmers for whom federal rehabilitation programs such as the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration were created.

Grant provides detailed overviews of the economics prevailing on the Plains prior to 1929, the issue of farm tenancy, and the Hoover years. The core of the book, however, explains New Deal programs as they applied to Great Plains farmers. The New Dealers initially provided help through direct relief programs or work projects. Troubled Plains farmers needed more, however, and the Resettlement Administration (1935), and the Farm Security Administration which followed it, arrived with plans to help farmers adapt. These brought mixed results, focusing as they did on subsistence farming in a region where entrepreneurial values flourished. Once rain and higher prices returned, Plains farmers chafed against the “balanced farming,” “balanced income” rehabilitation approach. Opportunity trumped security.

Down and Out on the Family Farm provides a fine overview of Plains economic issues and of the conflicts that arose between regional values and federal programs. There are no demons here, just a complex mixture of aspiring farmers, government, drought, and hard times. For those interested in knowing more about today’s Plains farm crisis, this book is an excellent introduction.

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On the Farm Front: The Women's Land Army in World War II. By Stephanie A. Carpenter. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003. viii + 214 pp. Photographs, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00.

The Women's Land Army (WLA), which coordinated the placement of hundreds of thousands of women on farms, ranches, and crop-processing facilities during World War II, provided women with patriotic work and farms with needed labor. The subject deserves comprehensive study to reveal this important segment of women's activities on the home front during the war.

Historian Stephanie Carpenter argues that women's wartime work in farm fields "changed the way the nation viewed the permanent farm labor force." Though farmers in large sections of the country at first refused to hire women, they ultimately had to give in as the lack of male workers threatened to reduce their harvests. Carpenter demonstrates that hesitant farmers became convinced that even young, urban women could work long days at hard, dirty field and barn tasks with their hands or with machinery. She notes that this resistance was regional and in many states women workers were accepted with no hesitation.

Lacking historic perspective on the role of women in agriculture, Carpenter cannot convince this reader that the changes were permanent. She rests her argument on shifting evidence—from questions about urban women as seasonal or year-round farm workers (a major concern for Florence Hall, WLA administrator), to farm wives who "helped out" as needed, to women who managed their own farms. Other histories of women in agriculture have shown that the nature of women's farm work is driven by economics and socially constructed gender concerns—tools Carpenter does not apply to her study.

As Carpenter points out, racism was another inhibiting force, one that was not modified or even temporarily overcome in the South. Carpenter's treatment of racist and segregationist social and economic structures

lacks sensitivity to the pervasive power of Southern racism and the role of white gender concepts that supported it.

Carpenter's book is a source of basic information about the WLA, but it lacks serious analysis. Did farmers resist hiring WLA volunteers because of the crops they raised, the use or lack of machinery, social constructions of gender (male and female) in a particular region, urban/rural divisions, or a sense that the farm family did not want to risk having urban women remark on their ways of life? Carpenter neglects to reveal negative comments by WLA workers and administrators about the program and individual farmers. Readers will wonder if WLA workers were abused or mistreated. Surprisingly, Carpenter did not interview any former WLA workers whose voices would have strengthened the study and made it more than a recitation of government sources.

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